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THE PROBLEM OF WELL-BEING AND SUFFERING IN THE OLD TESTAMENT.

I.

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The teaching regarding well-being—What is meant by well-being—Condition on which well-being depends—The end of well-being—The sources of suffering—The end served by suffering—The relation of the principle of well-being and suffering to the future life.

ONE of the important questions which engaged the attention of the religious thinkers and teachers of the Jewish people was that of suffering. Besides being the prominent subject of inquiry and discussion in the so-called "Wisdom Literature"—such as Job and Ecclesiastes—and occupying an important place in the Psalter and prophetic writings, references to it are as well found throughout the rest of the Old Testament literature. Other important problems in the Old Testament, such as the Kingdom of God and the Messianic hope, are more or less connected with it. A subject, therefore, such as this, which occupies so large a place in the range and thought of the Old Testament is one which in itself deserves careful investigation and study.

But in order fully to understand or estimate this question as it is viewed and presented in the Old Testament, it needs to be considered in the light of its counterpart, namely the problem of well-being. The two subjects go together; neither can well be considered or understood apart from the other. The subject, therefore, for consideration is the problem of well-being and suffering as it is presented in the Old Testament literature.

The following classification, it is thought, gives a correct and complete survey of all the material relating to the two problems.

I. The common elements or teaching regarding the question of well-being will be considered first of all.

And in the first place the sources of well-being may be noticed.

The two general classifications will naturally include all the

material bearing upon this point, namely the *ultimate source*, and the *proximate* or *subordinate sources*. The former refers to the power of God and the various divine attributes as exercised or expressed toward mankind: that is, not only the fact of God's absoluteness, that he is more powerful than any other being, and hence is sufficiently able to promote man's well-being, but as well his moral attributes are emphasized in this connection,—his righteousness, justice, holiness, truth, faithfulness; his guidance and care: his immanence and willingness to grant help in times of difficulty; his unmerited favor and loving-kindness. All such attributes as these, to take up which in detail our space forbids, are included under this heading.

The latter, namely the *subordinate* or *proximate sources* of well-being include all human efforts or agencies which in any way help to effect this result: such as the exercise of man's natural powers in his own behalf, or the agency of men or classes for the general well-being, such as the office of judges, leaders, priests, prophets, sages and kings. As an example of the latter, *cf.* Ps. 78:70-72.

Now in general these proximate sources are represented not only as being subordinate to the divine source but also as instruments of it (*e. g.*, Ps. 77:20). And so much does the thought of the importance of the divine overshadow the human agency in this connection that sometimes human effort is treated as of little importance (*e. g.*, Ps. 44:3).

The second point to be noticed is what is meant by well-being—what it includes. The answer is that it embraces various forms of material, social and spiritual good and blessings. A good illustration of these three elements, combined in a description of what constituted an ideal condition of well-being, may be found in Ps. 144:12-15.

Now these three elements in their various phases and expressions enter into the Old Testament conception of well-being, it may be said in general, throughout all its teaching. Of course there were times when more stress was laid on one element than another. Material blessings would naturally belong more to the earlier stage of teaching, while later, when men gave more atter-

tion to the seeming inequalities of life,—when the wicked were observed to possess material and social blessings, while the righteous had suffering as their portion, we find that this had the effect, among some of the more thoughtful, of leading them to place a higher value on the spiritual content of well-being. But in general, material and social blessings were regarded as forming an essential part. Thus even in the prophetic descriptions of the ideal future, material and social good are combined in varying proportions with that of spiritual good.

The third point to be considered is the condition upon which well-being is secured or upon which it depends. The condition is *righteousness* on man's part; the fulfilment by man of what God requires of him, or the presence of that attitude and spirit in him which God desires and approves of,—in a word righteousness of act and of disposition; or to state it in still another way, outward conduct which is expressive of a true spirit within.

In reference to keeping the law as a condition of well-being, it is noteworthy that it contains ceremonial duties as well as moral requirements which apparently were regarded as coördinate. But in the Deuteronomic code a service of the heart such as love and fear of God is likewise insisted on (*e.g.*, Dt. 10:12 f.; 11:13, 22; 6:4-9; 13:3; 30:15 f. 20; Josh. 22:5; 23:11). In Samuel, the prophet declares that obedience to God is better than sacrifice (1 Sam. 15:22). A similar thought is also found in Proverbs (21:3; *cf.* 15:8; 16:6; 21:27). While in the prophetic writings formalism is repeatedly declared to be insufficient to secure the realization of well-being.

The last point to be noticed under this topic is the true end of well-being, that is, what it is designed to produce or effect.

The fundamental thought of the Old Testament teaching on this point is evidently the religious devotion or consecration of the nation to their God. This was the end or object to which the possession of the various forms of material, social, and spiritual blessings was to lead up.¹ This fact is indicated in different ways. In the Psalter, for instance, it is especially noticeable in

¹ *Cf.* The development of a benevolent or humane spirit as also an end. *E.g.*, Dt. 15:12-15; 16:12; 24:18, 22; 10:19.

the form of gratitude expressed in thanksgiving and praise to God; also in the form of testimony and witnessing to others. The following references illustrate the last point mentioned. Ps. 51:12, 13; 35:18; 71:17, 18; 40:9, 10; 102:21; 109:30; 118:17, and many others. Expressions of gratitude are also found in various other parts of the Old Testament outside of the Psalter.

The true end of well-being is more often indicated indirectly, or is derived by way of inference. Thus the expressions which are found so frequently, that Israel is to be God's people, that they are to be loyal to him; that they are to know him as Jehovah,—such statements as these and others of a similar import indicate indirectly what the true end of well-being was.¹ And the same fact is derived by way of inference in the disappointment evidenced and the reproof uttered so strongly by the prophets from time to time in the history of the nation, on account of the ingratitude of the people in being disloyal to God for all their various blessings. This clearly shows what they considered the true end of well-being ought to be,—namely, devotion to God, and a loyal service to him.

To be also noted is the fact that the well-being of one person or group may serve a further end as related to other persons. Thus the well-being of one person or class as related to other persons (*mankind*) may serve to bless, encourage, or strengthen them, *e. g.*, Ps. 40:3: "And he hath put a new song in my mouth, even praise unto our God" (*i. e.*, cause for praising God). Then the end this will serve toward others is stated: "Many shall see it, and fear, And shall trust in Jehovah." *Cf.* Ps. 35:27; 87:1 f.; 98:3; 69:32; *cf.* also the patriarchal promises (J E): Gen. 12:2 f.; 7:1; 18:18 f.; 21:22 f.; 26:4; 30:27, 30; 39:3–5; Ex. 32:13. *Cf.* Zech. 8:13;² Micah 5:7 and various others.

¹ Some of such expressions may in certain places not only have a bearing, but a more direct connection with other divisions of this subject. Thus the fact that "Israel is to be God's people" may refer to the content of well-being, or the condition by which it is to be realized. The context of the particular passages helps to determine how the expressions are to be regarded.

² Compare in this connection the prophetic descriptions of the ideal future when other nations are to share in the blessings of God's people; *e. g.* Isaiah 2:3; Micah 4:1; Jer. 3:17; Ezek. 17:22–24; Isaiah 44:5; 25:6–9; 14:1; Haggai 2:9; Zech. 14:8 f. and many others.

In the Psalter the thought is found in a few references that the well-being of the righteous being furthered may serve the end of checking or rebuking the wicked. Thus Ps. 86:17; *cf.* 1 33, 4; 35:15, 23-25; 38:15 f.; 79:10; 115:2.

A few references are also found in which the thought is that the deliverance of the righteous from suffering may serve a beneficent end toward others in the way of witnessing for God to them, *e.g.*, Ps. 22:27; Isaiah 49:8.¹

Again as related to *God*, the well-being of Israel especially may serve the end of declaring his character or testifying in reference to it. Thus in Ps. 98:2, 3, "Jehovah hath made known his salvation: He hath remembered his mercy and faithfulness toward the house of Israel: All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God," *i.e.*, God's character declared by his promotion of the well-being of Israel. *Cf.* Ps. 92:12-15; 102:14-22; 106:8; 48:10; 115:2; 79:10; 109:26, 27; 67:1 f.; 126:1, 2; in (J E) Ex. 34:10; Num. 23:23; also Josh. 4:23, 24 (D) 1. Sam. 12:22; 2 Sam. 7:23, 26; Jer. 16:21; 32:20; Ezek. 28:25, 26; 34:27, 30; 37:13; Isa. 44:23; 60:21; 61:3; 49:3; *cf.* Isa. 49:26; 43:21; 45:15 f., 21 f.; 63:14, 19; 40:5; 41:20; 52:6, 10; 66:18, 19; 65:16; 42:8; 59:19. In the priestly narrative of the Hexateuch: Ex. 16:6, 12; 7:5; 14:15 f.; Num. 20:13; Lev. 22:32.

A similar thought is expressed in a more striking way in those passages in which the representation is that unless the well-being of Israel is promoted in certain circumstances, even when they are sinful, God's character would be misunderstood, *e.g.*, in (J E) Ex. 32:9-14 Israel, though sinful, is to be spared, lest the Egyptians draw a false inference as to God's character: "Wherefore should the Egyptians speak, saying, For evil did he bring them forth to slay them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth? *Cf.* Num. 14:13 f.; Deut. 32:26 f.; Josh. 7:9; *cf.* Deut. 9:26-29; Ezek. 20:9, 14, 22, 41, 44;

¹ Compare with this a thought in Ezekiel, that certain of the wicked are to be spared from the capture of Jerusalem to show to the heathen (12:16) and to Israel in exile (14:14, 22, 23) that God in his righteousness had caused the downfall of the city on account of its wickedness.

36:1-6, 11, 21, 23, 36, 38; 39:7, 23, 25-29; Joel 2:17; Isaiah 48:9, 11.

The above classification and references include all the common teaching relating to well-being.

2. A similar outline may be followed in classifying the common elements or teaching in reference to the problem of suffering.

The *sources* of suffering may be regarded as ultimate and proximate. The *ultimate*, referring to the nature or character of God expressed in displeasure toward man; *proximate* sources of suffering including all subordinate agencies acting adversely upon man. Such are generally regarded as active agents of the divine will; but sometimes as in the case of those who persecute the innocent and so bring suffering upon them, this does not hold true.

The content of suffering includes various forms of material, social or spiritual loss.

The condition bringing suffering is sin, the violation by man of what God requires of him; the presence of a spirit or disposition displeasing to God,—in a word, unrighteousness of act or spirit.

What has been stated in reference to the condition of well-being applies as well here, namely, that in the law ceremonial violations are placed apparently on the same plane and made coördinate with breaches of moral requirements. But as formalism was declared to be insufficient as a condition of securing well-being, so the fact which had always been held became more and more insisted on,—especially in the Psalms and prophetical writings,—that moral violations and sinfulness of spirit were the fundamental causes which brought suffering.

This fact is indicated in various places in the prophetical writings in their representations of the ground of suffering which had come or was to come upon outside nations. This was always set forth as a violation of some common fundamental principle of morality or sinfulness of spirit. Cf. Amos 1:3-2:3; Micah 4:13; 5:6, 15; Isa. 10:13; 17:12, 14; 29:7, 8; 30:27, 33; 31:8, 9; 33:1f., 10-12; 10:33, 34; 14:24f.; chaps. 15 and 16; Jer. 10:25; 12:14f.; 25:12f.; 30:16f.; 46:10f.; 50:7f. and others.

Nahum 1:2 f.; 3:1 f.; Zeph.¹ 2:3 f.; Hab. 1:11 f.; 2:6 f.; 3:12 f.; Ezek. 16:49, 50; 21:28 f.; chaps. 25–32, 38, 39 and others. Isa. 47:1 f.; 51:21–23; 54:15, 17; 63:1 f.; 59:18 f., Isa. 24:5 f., 21 f.; 25:9–12; 26:5 f., 21; 27:1; 13:9 f.; 14:12; 34:1 f., 8; Lam. 1:22; 3:58–66, *cf.* 4:21; Zech. 1:15 f.; 2:8 f.; Zech. 9:1 f., 13 f.; 10:11 f.; Zech. 12:1 f., 9 f.; 14:3 f., 12–19; Joel 3:2 f., 19; Mal. 1:4.

The end served by suffering may now be noticed. The fundamental conception of the Old Testament is that suffering comes as punishment for sin.

But besides this, suffering may also serve as a warning or have a reformatory end in view; that is, as far as the people of Israel are concerned, it may have as one of its objects to bring those sinning against God back to a true allegiance to him. Thus Ps. 119:67, 71, "Before I was afflicted I went astray, But now I observe thy word. It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes," *Cf.* Ps. 78:34 f.; 94:10; 41:4 f.; 38:1 f.; 83:9–18; 6:1 f.; 25:18; 40:12 f., and many other references.¹

Compare the same thought from the negative standpoint, that is, the end suffering was designed to accomplish though failing in its purpose; Ps. 78:31, 32; Amos 4:6.

The thought in the following references seems to be that the well-being of the nation will be restored after a sufficient period of suffering has been undergone; Ps. 102:13; Isa. 40:2.

Again, suffering may also serve a further end as related to others, just as was noticed in the matter of well being.

Thus, as related to *mankind*, suffering which comes upon the wicked may serve the end of encouraging the righteous: *e. g.*, the thought in Ps. 52:4–6 f. The righteous, upon seeing the punishment of the wicked shall fear and shall laugh, saying, "This is the man who made not God his strength," etc.; *cf.* Ps. 59:11–13; 58:10; 64:7 f.; 92:11; 54:7; 5:10, 11 (R. V. marg.). Also (J E) Ex. 14:31; 10:1 f.; 18:11; Job 22:19.

Ps. 79:10, on the other hand, indicates that suffering upon

¹ There are a few references in which this reformatory purpose is mentioned as applying to other nations, *e. g.*, Isa. 19:20 (*cf.* vs. 1); Isa. 23:15 f.; Jer. 12:14–17; 46:26; 48:47; 49:6, 34–39; Zeph. 2:11; 3:8 f.

the wicked may serve the end of discouraging others of like disposition.¹

Suffering may also serve the purpose of bringing fear upon other wicked (enemy), or have a deterrent influence. Thus, in the prophetic portion of the Hexateuch (J E) Ex. 15:14-16; Josh. 2:9, 24; 10:1 f., 20, 21; Num. 22:2, 3. In Deuteronomy 11:1-7; 17:13; 19:20; 13:11; 21:21; Josh. 2:10, 11; Jer. 3:8-10; 7:12-15; *cf.* 22:8, 9; Zeph. 3:5-7; Ezek. 23:10, 48; 18:14, 17; 32:9, 10; Isa. 59:19.

A few references are found in which suffering coming upon the wicked is mentioned as serving the end of confirming Divine appointments, or the truthfulness of God's representatives. Thus, in (J E) Num. 16:29,32; also chap. 12; *cf.* Jer. 5:10-13; Ezek. 33:33; *cf.* 29:21; 24:25-27.

Again, as related to *God*, the suffering of the wicked may serve the end of expressing God's character or witnessing to it. Thus, the thought in Ps. 83:8-18, Let Moab and the other nations have suffering "That they may know that thou alone whose name is Jehovah, Art the Most High over all the earth," *cf.* Ps. 74:22, 23; 79:10; 59:13; 58:10, 11; 64:8, 9. In (J E) Ex. 9:14-16; 8:10; 1 Sam. 17:46, 47; Jer. 16:21; 32:20 b.; Ezek. 12:15-20; 6:7, 10, 14; 7:4, 27; 11:10, 12; 13:9, 23; 15:7; 20:38; 24:24; Isa. 65:15, 16; 66:18; in P Ex. 7:5; 14:4, 17, 18.

At this point reference may also be made to the imprecatory expressions which are found in various parts of the Old Testament, but more especially in the Psalter. The most natural as well as the simplest explanation of such expressions is to consider them in reference to the fundamental principle of retribution, namely, as a demand on man's part that suffering be visited upon those who justly deserve it on account of their sin. That is, since sin was followed by suffering according to the commonly accepted theory, the next step was to hold that sin demanded suffering. Therefore let God visit the wicked with fitting punishment, since they deserve it, and thus vindicate the principle of retributive justice and his own character, *cf.* Ps. 5:10; 17:13;

¹ *Cf.* the opposite of this thought in Eccl. 8:11.

28:4, 5; 31:17, 18; 35:4-8, 26; 40:14, 15; 41:10; 55:9, 15; 56:7, 9; 58:6-9; 59:5, 11 f.; 68:1-3; 69:22-28; 70:2-3; 71:11-13; 74:10, 11, 22, 23; 79:6, 9, 10; 83:9 f.; 92:11; 94:1 f.; 104:35; 109:6-20, 29; 129:5 f.; 137:7 f.; 140:9; 141:10; 143:12; 144:6.

3. Another point connected with the subject of well-being and suffering in general is the relation of the principle of retribution to the future life. The question whether the future life is taught in the Old Testament is not included in the scope of this article, except so far as it may modify or carry forward the retributive principle to another sphere of existence. In the Psalter there are possible hints or foreshadowings of this doctrine, but no statements which clearly and positively refer the principle of retribution to a future life (*Cf.* Ps. 16:9 f.; 17:15; 73:23 f.; Ps. 49). In the well-known passage, Job 19:25 f., "I know that my Redeemer liveth," etc., there may be a reference to the future life, but this is far from certain. But as far as the subject of this article is concerned the interpretation of this section in Job does not matter since it plays no part in the subsequent discussion of that book. The only clear and unambiguous reference to the future life, to which the principle of retribution is represented as being carried forward is found in Daniel 12:2, "And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt."

Thus in general it may be said, that the principles of retribution are limited in the thought of the Old Testament to their exercise in the present life, this being the prominent idea, because in the Old Testament the emphasis is placed so entirely upon the present sphere of existence. Now this fact also lends additional significance to the explanation of the imprecatory expressions given above, namely, as a demand for the normal exercise of the principle of retribution in this life, since this was thought of as the only natural place for its expression.